

Buck Library

by Doris Sherrow, February 2001

The southernmost part of the 1894-1999 Town Hall building on Main Street says "Buck Library" over the entry way. Who was "Buck?"

The simple answer is that he was Horace Buck, born 1822 in the area known as Bucktown. He donated \$2,500 toward the building of a library shortly before his death in 1896 and another \$2,500 to this library in his will. This is the longer story.

Bucktown is the whimsical name for the section of Portland up near the Reservoir, about where Cotton Hill Road and South Road intersect with Old Marlborough Turnpike. It is also called Buck Hollow. James Buck (1774-1838), Horace's father, bought a large piece of land in this area in 1799 and built the sideways-to-the-road house at 252 Cotton Hill Road. He built a saw mill and developed a thriving lumber business, providing lumber for houses in Portland and Middletown, and for ships built along the edge of the Connecticut River. It was an area with considerable economic opportunity, but it was also far from the meddling reach of the community. James lived at a time when all men were taxed for the support of the Congregational Church, but he was something of a free thinker, and not a member of the church, so at one time, he refused to pay his rates. Consequently his cattle were seized and sold at auction. It is tempting to think that James lived out in the hinterlands to avoid his more orthodox Congregational neighbors.

His younger brother Samuel (1779-1840) lived in Bucktown, too, although research to date has not shown exactly where. Each of these men had twelve children, many of whom moved out of the area as they grew up. Horace Buck was born in 1822, the last of James' children. He came into a family of five teenagers and young adults and three younger children. His oldest brother, Erastus, worked with their father and lived with his wife and small son, Silas. Despite the relative isolation of "Bucktown," Horace Buck would have grown up with a sense of community and people around him who loved him.

Through the 1820s, his siblings married and moved out. His cousins, the sons and daughters of his Uncle Samuel, did likewise. These were happy events, marriages and new babies. It wasn't until 1837 that tragedy struck, when his 20-year-old brother Justus died. The next year, their father died, and young Horace went to live with his sister Fanny. She was closest in age to him, having been three when he was born. She had recently married Joseph Goodrich II from Rocky Hill, and they lived in the little house with the bridge in the front yard on 305 Old Marlborough Turnpike.

He lived there a year, then, at age 16, moved to Glastonbury to learn the carriage-making trade from his brother James F., who was eight years older than him. Probably Horace had worked with his brother Erastus after their father's death, but Erastus died the year after their father, Horace had to go to James' shop to continue working.

In 1841, Horace and James returned to Portland to build carriages there. The wagon called the Buckboard was supposedly invented by them, though definitive proof for that statement may reside in an archive in South Carolina, where the Bucks did much of their business.

On March 2, 1845, Horace married Eliza Hall, who had grown up at 118 Cotton Hill Road, and the first of their three children, Martha, was born December 31st of that year. Horace and Eliza were living at 245 Cotton Hill Road, the house he had bought shortly before Martha was born.

Sadly, little Martha died the September before her third birthday. For five years the Buck household was childless. Then, in August of 1853, a son, Olin, was born. Four years later came another son, Earl.

Horace Buck wrote of this period in the Buck genealogy which he produced in 1894, speaking of himself in the third person: "...he carried on a large and extensive business, and his was the only carriage shop in the town. He also had a large iron foundry and manufactured plows quite extensively, and made a success in the business."

All that changed in April of 1860. Both he and his sons came down with scarlet fever. He recovered, but two year old Earl died on April 14th, and six year old Olin, ten days later. In the genealogy he wrote briefly of their deaths, then of himself said only, "...he sold out his business." Those words masked deep pain, because he immediately moved with his wife down to the Pecauset area, where he took over a grocery store formerly run by Capt. John McCleve.

Not long after, he moved to a Main Street location, with even greater traffic. There is a sense that he was fleeing the isolation of Bucktown, seeking the warmth of human companionship, even if it was only folks buying groceries.

He remained downtown until 1866, when he moved to Worcester, Massachusetts. There he worked as an agent of a cooperative store, and later built yet another carriage shop, and a house at 98 Chandler Street in Worcester, where he finished out his days.

Buck wrote his genealogy in the early 1890s. He must have had to visit Portland to research birth dates and cousins' grandchildren. Probably he caught wind of Portland's struggle around that time to acquire the solid brownstone Jonathan Fuller house on Main Street for its town hall. Also around this time, Andrew Carnegie was giving back to many communities in gratitude for his phenomenal success by creating libraries in towns all over America. Buck may or may not have heard of Carnegie's works. Somehow the idea occurred to him that an addition could be built on the Fuller house for a library, and he arranged to supply the money.

Interestingly, Carnegie insisted that his libraries NOT be known as "Carnegie" libraries; Buck had a different request. Because his three children had died, no one would carry on his name. He wanted the building in Portland, the town where his children were buried, and he, too, soon would be, to carry on the Buck family name. And that's why it still says "Buck Library."